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The Indian Place-name Wasaumkeag 1932

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A paper read before Banger Hist. Soc. prob.
Jan., 1932 and printed in a Banger paper seen
after *Jan. 14, 1932*

The Indian Place-name Wasaumkeag.

Pownal's report on building the Fort on Fort Point in Penobscot Bay, says: "got within about two Miles, or a League of Wasaumkeag Point". And a foot-note to an early reprint of it says: "The name Wasaumkeag occurs only in Gov. Pownall's Journal". (Maine Historical Colls., Series I, vol. 5, p. 377.)

The map of the penobscot in 1759, recently discovered ^{by Mr. W.O. Sawtelle} in the British Crown Collection of Maps and reprinted in the Daily News for October 19, 1931, repeats the word, places it squarely upon Fort Point peninsula and subdivides it into a good Indian form Wasa-umkeag. This is wassa, white, bright, shining, clear; um, sand; keag, place, or more specifically, a point between two currents of water. White-sand-point would be the meaning, and the long sandbar at the tip of Fort Point and the white beach just inside it are perfectly described by it.

There seems to be every reason to accept Governor Pownal's name and his identification of the place. It is the earliest occurrence, is good Indian, and it applies with accuracy to the place.

However, when we come to look into the matter we find that Fort Point is not the true Wasaumkeag. Sometimes a sort of perversity marks Indian place-names. Even though there is a white sand point at Fort Point, the true Wasaumkeag, or Wassumkeag as it is oftener written, was Brigadier's, or Sears's island. Could it have been that when the Pownal Expedition was "about two Miles, or a League" from their destination, General Waldo inquired of some Indian and was mis-

understood, and so got the name of Brigadier's Island instead of Fort Point; or that he himself confused what was told him correctly? That we may never know, but the true Wasaumkeag is the half-tide island at the entrance of Searsport and Stockton Bays.

The evidence for this rests upon the word of three competent authorities. The oldest statement I received from my father, who told me when a child that the Wassumkeag House, the great hotel which C.B. Sanford built at Fort Point, was wrongly named; that the true name of Fort Point, that is of the tip of the point, not the whole peninsula, was a word meaning an otter slide, and that Wassumkeag or "place where the shore shines" as he translated it, was the name of Brigadier's Island, as we then called it, now Sears's Island. He had been there with Indians and had received the word from them seventy or eighty years ago. The next authority, in time, is an unknown Penobscot Indian who, about 1887, wrote an article for a short-lived newspaper called the Oldtown Herald.

This man wrote at some length. "Sears Island on account of a little sandy beach which can be seen from far away in the southern direction, was called 'War-sumkeag', 'Bright Sand'. Now we come to the celebrated 'Ar-quar-har-see-dec,' 'Stepping Ashore', now known as Old Fort Point, where hundreds of pleasure seekers during the summer months enjoy the cool seabreeze, but in the olden times when members of our tribe visited here, they only stopped long enough to make the sign of their visit, showing which direction they were going, the number of their party and canoes, etc. On account of its being a marking place no one was ever allowed to mar or deface its outline by using it for a camping ground. The reason for selecting this spot for a marking place, was because of it being the last prominent point, from entering the river from the bay, or going out into the bay from the river, and coming or going from the eastern or western

shore all stopped here and made their marks. All the families of our tribe were known by a mark. Some were represented by animals, fish and reptiles, and others by well known implements, the moon, sun, etc. Each mark showed the number in the family and pointed out the direction taken."

Thus Fort Point had a highly characteristic name of its own, *Aiquahassedik*, to revise a little the spelling of the Indian writer. It was the "Landing-place".

There would seem to be some variance here~~e~~ between this and the "Otter Slide" given by my father; but that is fully explained by notes which I found in the manuscript dictionary left only partly finished by that accomplished Indian scholar, Rev. M.C.O'Brien. *Aguahassodi*, "landing of otters", he wrote; *Aguahassidek*, "landing at Fort Point"; *Aguahassin*, "to land". A characteristic habit of the otter is going ashore to play, which they do by sliding on their stomachs down a smooth incline. Such a place used to be called a n "otter slide". Now the bank above the little white beach at ^{seashore} Fort Point is very steep, and whether or not the ~~sea~~ otters, now extinct, used it in old times for a slide, the spot was well suited for it. But more likely the word *Aguahassodik*, or *Agguahassidek*, drew directly from the root meaning "to land" and calling it "the Otter Slide" was quite a secondary interpretation: it was either, or both; whether for otters or men, it was a "landing place".

In the face of so strong a reason as is given by this Indian there can be no question but Pownall was mistaken in assigning the name *Wasa-umkeag* to Fort Point. He was not an authority upon Indian names.

But what was the name of this bold promontory? We do not know. No Indian name for it has as yet been discovered. Yet recently,

working over the maps and plans in the Pejepscot papers in the Maine Historical Society, I came upon a very old pen-drawn map, which most likely is only a tracing of something original much older, which gave all the ^{survey's} sailing courses up the penobscot River. There were but two names upon it. Castine was called Pequoite, a manifest error for Pentegoet, and on the western side of the bay was a spot marked as Read Head, that is, Red Head. (If head spelled hed, read should spell red.) Now there is no other place on the western shore where the coast is so bold and so decidedly red as the rocks below the lighthouse at Fort Point. It looks very much as if here were the translation of some lost Indian name of the place.

It is interesting to note, by a study of his map, that Capt. John Smith explored the penobscot as far up as Verona, and has put down very recognizably both Cape Jellison and Sears Island, though supposing that the former is an island also. Many of his islands in Penobscot bay can be identified by taking a modern topographical map and laying a rule according to his compass points across it. The result shows that he was drawing country which he had been over and that his map is better than is supposed.

In my searching I found another rare map of the Penobscot which may not have been supposed to be lost, but of which no trace could be found when I was working upon the Chadwick Survey of 1764. This is Joseph Chadwick's map of General Waldo's lands, drawn in 1767, eight years after his death, for his heirs. It charts the Penobscot from Belfast to Oldtown on the scale of two miles to an inch, and is accompanied by a much larger scale map in several sections upon a scale greater than that of our modern topographical maps, which has

comments upon the soil, the timber and information useful in the sale of lands. What is surprising is that this map, made only three years after Colonel Jonathan Buck settled at Bucksport, shows names which indicate that pioneers had been much farther up the Penobscot at that time than is supposed, and were engaged in at least part-year industries. Salmon fisheries are put down at Bucksport, just where the great pulp mill is now; at Mill Creek and at Squaw Point. The latter can be definitely determined by the tiny island just below at the mouth of what used to be called Pitcher's Brook. Verona Island, later known as Orphan Island, because it was a large part of the heritage of the General's children, is given as Beton Island. Buck's saw Mill is shown on the stream in the center of Bucksport. The Sowadabscook is Bogue's or Bogus's River (hard to determine one letter) and the Wenduskeag is not at all the Wenduskeag, nor even the Condeskeag, but Kelloch Stream. Who were these unknown people who came before the Bussells and Wheeler and Colonel Brewer? It makes us wonder whether after all we yet know the whole story of our river.

AWASSAWAMKIK

From the New England Historical and Genealogical Register, 34:90 (1889)

Mission of Penhallow and Atkinson, in 1703, to the Penobscot Indians.

Communicated by the late Capt. Wm. F. Goodwin, U.S.A., Concord, N.H.

From an original MS. in the handwriting of Samuel Penhallow, whose history of the Indian wars began from the August subsequent to this episode.

- I. Letter from Lt. Gov. Wm. Partridge to Saml. Penhallow and Atkinson instructing them to embark at once on the sea flower John Abbott master, to Sackadehec to take on a pilot "and then to make the best of your way to AWASSAWAMKICK or Hazle Nutt Island where you may speak with menser Gaulin, and deliver my letter and advise with him of the disposall of these goods you have on board for the supply of these Indians"

Footnote by Editor, with letter from Joseph Williamson:
Belfast, November 12th, 1879

"An examination of all accessible authorities does not enable me to answer your note of the 31st ult. satisfactorily.

"Awassawamkik, or Awassamkik Island is a new name to me. The nearest approach to it is Wassaumkeag, a peninsula at the mouth of Penobscot river, where Governor Pownall built a fort in 1759. This locality has always been a place of resort for the Indians. In the Abnaki dialect the etymology of the name is was, shining; aum or emp, cliff; keag, place.

"The narrative states that Mons. Gaulin was desired 'to hasten down' from 'Penobscot fort' to Awassamkik. There were then two Penobscot forts; one on the island at Oldtown, above Sanger, which was the object of Church's expedition in 1696; and the other at Castine. Naaskeag, mentioned in the narrative, is below Castine. Below Naskeag and below Long Island is Seven Hundred Acre Island, where French and Indians occasionally lived in time of St. Castin..... I am of opinion that Awassawamkik was Seven Hundred Acre Island and that Regent 'with upwards of twenty canoes', came down from Castin's Fort. Wassumkeag point would not have been called an island, or I should say it was the locality in question, and that the canoes came down the Penobscot from Oldtown."

- II. Letter to Mons. Gaulin, dated Portsmouth April 8th, 1703, sent by Messrs. Penhallow and Atkinson.

- III. Letter from the Commissioners reporting their undertaking, Atkinson and Penhallow to Lt. Gov. Partridge. The date must be a misprint for the 22nd.

Portsmouth, April 2, 1703

May it please

Yo^r Excellency

On y^e 9th Instant by desire of y^e Honorable the Lieut. Gov^r I sailed hence with Mr Atkinson for Awassaamkik Island, In Penobscot, and being (yesterday) returned, humbly crave leave to give yo^r Excelency a true and full acc^t of mat^r

..... Monsieur Pelassus, the Noridgwack fryer [had been trying to stir up the Pennebec Indians on account of the late infraction of Chadwell and his company at Naaskeag.

Penhallow and Atkinson at Penobscot, cont. much abbreviated for lack of time.

[We] did send an Express [from Sagadeheck] unto mauxis tarheagues up Kennibeeck river; desiring to speak with him..... [He came with four canoes, and spoke of himself as] the ancientst and most Principall Sagamore.... Wanadugunbuen, a Penobscot sachem being present.

[We told the Indians] Chadwell's commission had been dissolved, his sword taken away and himself committed to close prison under severe hardships.

Mauxis permits two of his principall Indians to go with them to Penobscot-- Bampzeen was ordered by himself and one Lue of Penobscot by Wanudagumbuen: who behaved themselves very civilly.

On y^e 13, we saild from Sagadehec and arrived that evening in Awassaamkik Island; on which was only one house, not an Indian to be seen, altho no less than twenty-five wigwams nere it, very lately deserted, purely occasioned by the unhappy Infraction on Philip meneer."

He tells the story of sending to get letter to the priests and of the Indians coming down and the story of the base attack on meneer, as he calls him, who lived at Naskeag and was killed by the ruffians, who abused his wife, robbed them of a large amount of fur and considerable money.

"Wanungonet their Sagamore came aboard". He says Meneer's wife was robbed of 20 new English shillings which her father Casteen gave her.

WASSUMKEAG

"White Sand-beach"

The name, usually applied to Fort Point, does not belong to it but to Sears' Island some distance below it

By an error Gov. Pownall applied the name to Fort Point in his Journal, when he built Fort Pownall there, and it has always held. When C.B. Sanford, about 1870, built the Wassumkeag House at Fort Point, he established it.

I Maine Historical Colls., V:377, f.n., says: "The name Wasaumkeag occurs only in Gov. Pownall's Journal". He used the word several times, as, "Got within about two miles of a League of Wasaumkeag Point"

But the name did not belong here. Fort Point was "The Otter Slide Point". There is there, however, a small beach, with a long bar making out from it, all of very white sand and it is possible that when asking the name of an Indian, "What do you call this?" the Indian very correctly replied "This (where they were standing) is White-sand Point

See Fort Point and Aguahassidek

Wassumkeag, "shining beach"--Lewey vetchum

WASSA-AM~~P~~K-I-HEMOOK

High Head in Bangor

This seems to be the word which Greenlef and Joseph wecolar misapplied to the Marsh Island Rapids ,WANASSABSKEK

Wassamki means "shing sand" (O'Brien)
Hemock, an unknown ending, though Lewey Ketchum said it meant "a lake"